

FOLK-LORE IN CEYLON.*

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Very great interest and importance attach to the folk-lore of any nation, as is evidenced by the labors bestowed on the subject by eminent writers, and the manner in which those labors have been appreciated. The tales of a people once collected and recorded afford material alike for the ethnologist, the philologist and the historian to build upon, and enable them to arrive at truths previously unknown, and to throw fresh light upon theories which are but partially established. It is not the amusement which the tales and stories afford that makes them valuable but it is the great truths which they point to in the field of literature and science that commend them to our notice and study. Readers who wish to have some idea of the importance of folk-lore to ethnology and its cognate sciences, will find the subject fully treated in the "Chips from a German workshop" of Max Müller, and in the introduction to the "Popular Tales from the Norse" of Mr. Dasent.

While different writers have labored in the work of collecting tales in other countries, while each successive number of the "Indian Antiquary" presents to us the folk-lore of the Panjáb and other parts of India, it is a matter both of regret and surprise that no writer in Ceylon has, so far as I am aware, yet begun to work in a systematic manner in collecting the folk-lore of this Island.

* I was requested by the Honorary Secretary of this Society, about a month ago, to prepare a Paper to be read at this Meeting, and he suggested the Folklore of Ceylon as a subject that would be of interest. Although the time at my disposal was insufficient either to collect materials, or, when collected, to digest them, I readily accepted the undertaking, convinced that any shortcomings on my part would be excused in view of the shortness of the time given me and the difficulty of the subject to be dealt with.

Mr. Steele the author of a metrical translation of the *Kusa Jātaka* has,—no doubt with the view of attracting the attention of literary men to this interesting subject,—given a few Sinhalese stories as an appendix to his work, and has concluded them with the following appropriate observations:—

"Old-world household stories are very plentiful in Ceylon. The foregoing may be of interest as shewing how rich a field, one little harvested yet, lies open to the gleaner. When it is remembered that, besides the aboriginal wild race, the Veddās, the Island is the home of Sinhalese, an Aryan race from the upper valley of the Ganges, of Tamils, of Moors, the descendants of the ancient Arab navigators, who, as Sinbad avouches, voyaged often to Serendib, of Malays, not to mention Parsis, Chinese, Kaffirs from Eastern Africa, Maldivians, Bengalis and many others,—men of widely diverse descent and creeds, the abundance of, so to speak, unwrought folk-lore will be readily recognised.

"It is the writer's hope, should the present venture meet with favor and acceptance, to offer a large and more varied selection to the reader hereafter."

The hope here entertained has not, I think, been realized, nor has the subject been taken up by any other writer that I am aware of.

A complete collection of the tales and stories existing in Ceylon,—and I think they exist as abundantly here as in any other country in the world,—can only be the work of time. It is therefore desirable that, rather than wait to make such a collection, writers who may wish to labor in this field of literary investigation should publish what stories they may collect in the columns of this Society's Journal as the only literary periodical in the Island.

The present Paper is merely a beginning in this direction, and it is to be hoped that other writers who are more able than myself to undertake the task, and have more leisure at their disposal than I can command, will from time to time contribute their collections to this Journal, and thus supply a store of materials for future scientific and linguistic investigations.

In the work of collection it is necessary that a great deal of care and discrimination should be exercised, for what is really wanted and what can lead us to real truths are the genuine stories of the Sinhalese—those which are quite free from foreign influences and have existed among the people from time immemorial. These can only be gathered from the inhabitants of villages and of the remoter parts of the Island into which western civilization has not yet penetrated. In the principal towns and suburbs there are now current among the Sinhalese several stories taken from English books and other sources, and hence too much care and caution cannot be exercised in deciding whether a story is really free from such influences or not.

In this paper I am able to give only one Sinhalese story out of the collection I have made. Its aim is to shew the cunning and avarice of women and the fertility of their resource when tricks have to be resorted to for the accomplishment of an object, the averting of a calamity or the getting out of a difficulty.

In order to understand the story it is necessary that the reader should know what is meant by the expressions “to take *sil*” and “to give *sil*.” *Sil* is a religious observance. “To take *sil*” is to vow or to promise and solemnly undertake to follow strictly the precepts of Buddha, not to kill, not to steal, not to drink &c. One desirous of taking *sil* attends the Paṇsala and after bowing down in reverence to the priest recites “the three *saraṇas*” as follows, the devotee repeating them after him :

*Buddhaṇ saraṇaṇ gacchhāmi,
Dhammaṇ saraṇaṇ gacchhāmi,
Saṅghaṇ saraṇaṇ gacchhāmi.*

This is done three times after which the commands or precepts are recited by the priest and repeated by the devotee. In this ceremony the priest is said “to give *sil*” and the devotee “to take or receive *sil*.”

I must also premise before beginning the story that when a priest is invited by a layman to his house for the purpose of performing a religious ceremony or of partaking of meals usually

called *dan* or *dāna*, “a gift or any thing given,” it is not permitted to the priest to decline the invitation, except under unavoidable circumstances such as sickness or a prior engagement.

The story then runs thus.

Once on a time there was a simple and dull-witted man who had a cunning and artful wife. The woman was, however, much devoted to religion, and was a regular attendant on *pōya* days at the Vihāra and Paṇsala in order to worship Buddha and to receive *sil*. The man, who had previously paid no attention to religion, was one day seized all of a sudden with a desire to follow the example of his wife, and calling her immediately to his side said, “I wish to take *sil*: tell me how I should set about it.”

The wife delighted to see her husband form so good a resolution said, “Get up very early in the morning, go to the Paṇsala with a pingo of boiled rice and curries, offer them to the priest, and repeat the words which he will pronounce.”

The earnestness with which the man formed his resolution and his anxiety to act on it were so great that sleep fled from his eyes, and he impatiently watched for the dawn to hasten to the priest’s residence. Long before the break of day he set out for the Paṇsala which lay about a mile from his house. On arriving there he found the door closed, but he knocked with such violence as to rouse the priest who was fast asleep in an inner chamber.

“I wonder” said the priest to himself “who this can be that disturbs my repose at this ungodly hour.” So saying he rose and began to rub his eyes. The knocks on the door continued with redoubled vigour. The priest then jumped out of bed, and approaching the door with some degree of anxiety said “*Kavuda?*”, “Who’s there?”

The man, following literally the instructions of his wife as to repetition, replied “*Kavuda?*”

The priest could not understand how any one could be in the mood for fun at such a time or place, and drawing still nearer the door said, “*Mokada?*”, “What’s the matter?”

"*Mokada*?", repeated the man.

The priest was bewildered. He could not for the life of him understand the meaning of so strange a proceeding, and he called out in a loud and stern tone, "*Allapiya*", "Lay hold (of him)."

"*Allapiya*" was as quickly echoed forth.

The priest then went into one of the rooms to wake up his servant, and in the meantime the simpleton, hearing nothing more, concluded that the ceremony was over and returned home, leaving the pingo at the door. The priest and his servant opened the door to see what it all meant, and right glad were they to find the pingo, but they could see no one.

On reaching home the man called his wife to his side and said, "I have received *sil*: I feel such a change: I am determined to be more assiduous than you have been in the observance and practice of the rite." The man then went to work in the field, returned home in the evening, and took his dinner, but was scarce in bed before he repeated "*Kavuda? Mokada? Allapiya*."

"What's the sense of these words?", enquired the wife in surprise.

"I am reciting what the priest taught me when he gave me *sil*," said the man.

"I wonder if you're right in your head!", said the wife.

"Nay," said he, "in right good earnest I tell you, I repeat what the priest taught me. I am practising *sil*."

"Don't talk to me," retorted the woman. "If you're not mad already, you're very near it!"

The man, however, paid no attention to his wife's words believing her to be in jest, but kept repeating the words all night long at frequent intervals, to the serious disturbance of his wife's rest and that of the other inmates of the house. This went on for several nights, and nothing that the wife could think of had the effect of convincing the man of his mistake.

About this time three thieves broke into the King's Treasury at night, and stole from it a part of his treasure, consisting of gold, silver, precious stones, pearls and jewels of great value.

Carrying off their booty they came to the *pilikanna* [back part] of the man's house, and, as it was a safe and convenient spot for the division of their spoil, they began to divide it. They had hardly commenced their task when they were startled by the words "*Kavuda? Mokada? Allapiya*" in a loud voice from within the house.

"We are undone," said one of the thieves: "Discovered most certainly," said another: "Hush! hush!", said the third, "the words may have been addressed to somebody else."

So they made up their minds to go on with the division, but had scarcely recommenced before the same words "*Kavuda? Mokada? Allapiya*" fell on their ears. Then they forthwith took to their heels leaving the booty behind.

The man hearing all the clatter outside, went to the *pilikanna* with a light, and saw to his amazement the three heaps of treasure. He immediately awoke his wife and took her to the spot. Her eyes beamed as she beheld the unexpected wealth. Husband and wife together conveyed the heaps into the house, and all was secure in trunks before the day dawned.

"Now," said the man, "was it not my observance of *sil* that brought us this luck?"

"Yes," said the wife, "I am glad you have been so earnest in its practice."

The man's thoughts were now directed to the consideration, as to how best he might shew his gratitude to the priest who had given him *sil*.

"It is our duty," said he to his wife, "to make a gift of one-third of the wealth to the priest who gave me *sil*, and who has thus been the means of our acquiring this unlooked for fortune. Prepare breakfast for him, therefore, to-morrow morning, and I will invite him to partake of it, and to receive the offering of a third of the treasure."

"Nay, nay," said the woman, "that will never do. What the priest taught you was not *sil*."

"Nonsense," said her husband, "hold your tongue and attend to what I say. I must shew my gratitude to the priest; I must give him a third of the wealth."

"Well, if you must—you must" said the woman.

Words and tears were of no avail. The man was firm as a rock, and his wife gave up all hopes of dissuading him from his purpose.

Next morning she prepared meals for the priest. The man called at the Paṇsala and said to the priest: "My lord, you were kind enough to give me *sil* some time ago, and I have been a constant and diligent observer of the rite ever since. The result is that I have been blessed with very valuable treasure, quite sufficient to keep me and mine comfortable for many generations to come. Condescend therefore to repair to my humble abode, partake of the meal I have prepared for you, and receive one-third of the fortune I have come by, as a token of my gratitude."

"I never saw you before," said the priest, "nor do I remember having ever given you *sil*."

"Then it must be some other priest in this Paṇsala," said the man; "it matters little which, only come and receive the gift."

The man led the way and the priest and his servant followed, not, however, without some suspicion and fear. When they had come within sight of the house the man saw his wife standing in the compound.

"Come on leisurely," said the man to the priest, "while I run a-head to see that everything is ready for your reception." So saying the man ran up to his wife and whispered in her ear, "Has our neighbour brought the curds we ordered last evening?"

"Not yet."

"I will go and fetch it then," said he; "in the meantime give the priest a seat and attend to him till I return."

Now when the priest saw the man whispering in the woman's ear, his suspicions of some foul play, which had already been roused, were almost confirmed.

So when he got to the house he said to the woman, "Pray what did your husband whisper in your ear?"

"Bad luck to you!", said the woman, "my husband is gone to fetch a rice pounder to make an end of you!"

When the priest heard this he ran as fast he could and the servant after him.

They had not run far before the man returned with the curds.

"Why are they running away?" said he.

"That's more than I can say," answered his wife; "but the priest told me to ask you to follow him with a rice-pounder."

The man hastened into the kitchen, took up a rice-pounder, and away he went at full speed.

"Stop a bit! stop a bit! your Reverence," he bellowed.

But the priest, seeing the man actually following with a rice-pounder, redoubled his steps and was soon out of sight, and the man could not find him though he searched every nook and corner of the Paṇsala.

So the man returned home and never more thought of offering the wealth to the priest, and right glad was the woman to find that her plan had succeeded so well.